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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues in English instruction, compiled by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this report, the sixth annual trends and issues report by the commissions. The commissions and their directors are as follows: (1) Commission on Language (Jesse Perry); (2) Commission on Curriculum (Linda Shadiow); (3) Commission on Literature (Gladys V. Veidemanis); (4) Commission on Composition (Sharon Crowley); (5) Commission on Reading (Constance Weaver); and (6) Commission on Media (William V. Costanzo). The report of the Standing Committee against Censorship (John M. Kean) is also included. Some of the subjects discussed in the document include undergraduate teacher education, language programs, language arts textbooks, computers in English language arts, whole language, local curriculum development, English-only movement, the narrowing of the literary canon, an exclusionary approach to the teaching of literature, testing, reading-writing relationships, computers in composition, National Writing Projects, inservice education, film and television criticism, censorship, and academic freedom. (MS)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1989--SEVEN SUMMARIES.

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Compiled by Stephen Piazza and Charles Suhor, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent Annual Convention, the six NCTE Commissions and the Standing Committee Against Censorship informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the conclusions and opinions of these groups do not constitute official positions of NCTE, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the sixth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

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COMMISSION ON LANGUAGE
Trends and Issues Summary

The Commission on Language continues to be interested in the English-Only movement that only recently added three more states to its column. The Commission strongly urges NCTE to give increased attention to an issue that is fraught with racism. The Commission also passed a motion encouraging the NCTE Executive Committee to organize a special task force on the English-Only movement, to work with other professional groups to oppose the English Language Amendment and work for a better public understanding of the benefits of linguistic pluralism in America.

The Commission expressed clear views about the quality of undergraduate teacher education. In revising teacher education programs in English, the Commission believes the needs of English teachers above and beyond those of standard English majors should be considered. What serves as the traditional major on most campuses today emphasizes literature, giving some lip service to theory, and pays little attention to other aspects of verbal communication.

The Commission is still concerned with language and how it is learned. The Council has been sensitive to the importance of situational appropriateness in describing language patterns. The Commission applauds a trend to increasingly detail descriptions of language variation depending upon the audience and the situation. Language programs which deny differences and do not build on a respect for and understanding of the different linguistic backgrounds and strengths that learners bring to the school contribute to dropout rate for students who have been declared "at risk."

The Commission's attention is drawn to an array of developments which need to be given increased attention and or possibly replaced with new methodology and strategies that are based upon sound research and successful practice. One such development has to do with language arts textbook, especially at the K-6 grade levels; a majority of these texts continue to separate the strands of language arts and focus on drill, and practice workbook activities that are not easily transferable to the real uses of language in the communicative arts of speaking, reading or writing.

Many American schools continue to divide students by measures of ability or achievement and assign them to homogeneous, leveled groups, for instruction, while such tracking may be an educationally sound practice in certain rare circumstances, it presents many grave problems which usually outweigh its benefits.

A handful of American states adopt school textbooks on a statewide basis, a practice which causes problems for teachers and students throughout the nation. In the adoption states, classroom teachers and local school districts are deprived of the full range of alternatives which they have the professional right to consider as they seek out the best instructional materials for their own students. Outside the adoption states, teachers and districts often find that the materials available for their review have been developed expressly to meet the idiosyncratic demands and criteria of the adoption states.

Trends and Issues Summary

The Commission continues to be concerned about the appropriate use of computers in the English language arts. They offer a wide range of both constructive possibilities and significant dangers. On the positive side, computers can become part of classroom activities which genuinely enhance students' experience of language and ideas. Word processing, databases, networking, bulletin boards, simulations, interactive fiction, LOGO, and electronic mail are among the computer uses which, in the hands of thoughtful teachers, can become part of rich, imaginative instruction in English.

Finally, the Commission is concerned that the term "whole language" is applied more broadly by others than the "teacher founders" who apply the term to classroom curricula that has grown out of studies of language learning, including the reading and writing processes. Whole language classrooms, therefore, are places where children learn language while using it in functional, meaningful contexts.

Jesse Perry
Director

TRENDS AND ISSUES STATEMENT
Commission on Curriculum

The Commission on English Curriculum

1. Sees increasing reliance on curriculum documents with a resulting lack of participation in any ongoing curriculum process for English/Language Arts teachers;

With national and state "models" being proposed (e.g. Bennett's James Madison High School, James Madison Elementary School) and cultural literacy dictionary entries being sequenced for different grade levels (Hirsch's Dictionary of Cultural Literacy), there is a lack of focus on the process of developing a curriculum that involves the teachers, students, and community for whom that curriculum is intended. The role of the classroom teacher in the process of shaping the curriculum and in choosing textbooks and instructional materials varies greatly from state to state. The Commission's feelings were verified by a recently-released report on teacher involvement in decisionmaking (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, September 1988) which found that overall 21% of all teachers felt "not very involved" in choosing textbooks and instructional materials (on state-by-state basis, the range was 7% to 39%); and overall 37% of all teachers felt "not very involved" in shaping the curriculum (the range was 15% to 60%).

2. Continues to be concerned about the trend of local curriculum development being delegated to school personnel who lack appropriate expertise in either curriculum development or subject matter (or both);

Curriculum documents arrived at in this manner frequently appear to consist of "cut and paste" accretions of separate items, unrelated to each other, not grounded in any theoretic curricular or subject matter base, and seemingly divorced from the schools, teachers, and students for whom the curriculum is intended. Such documents reflect little collaboration, short-term development, limited flexibility, and often have more to do with testing than teaching.

3. Notes the recent emergence in the popular press of curriculum as a battle ground for "culture wars," a trend which further trivializes the curriculum process and reinforces a reductionist definition of what it means to be an educated person;

The English-only movement, the trivial pursuit questions about authors and plot summaries, and the box-score style reporting of test scores lead to labeling (the have and have not's) and to misleading conclusions about "who" should have "what," and how that "what" can be defined (and who should have a role in defining it). This is a continuation of a trend noted last year toward more homogeneity in curriculum at a time when recognition of the strengths of diversity is increasingly important.

4. Applauds the curriculum collaboration that is going on in selected districts because of the responsiveness of the documents that result from this collaboration and the recognition of the value of ongoing role of teachers and students.

The number of academic alliances is increasing (informal organizations where teachers

from preschool through university meet to discuss common issues); the National Writing Project continues to strengthen the teacher/researcher and inservice networks (where teachers serve as resources for each other throughout the country); cross-curriculum cooperation is becoming more visible (e.g. writing-across-the-curriculum projects, critical thinking initiatives); the number of conference, colloquiums and studies. Sponsored by coalitions of professional organizations is also increasing.

In reviewing four components of the curriculum process, selection of materials, sequencing of the materials, delivery of the materials, and evaluation of the materials, the Commission found a continuation of the major trends cited last year. The selection of materials is heavily influenced by political forces and is too often text- and/or test-driven. Top-down, mandated curriculum fails to acknowledge the nature of the community and needs of local students. The sequencing of the materials (goals and objectives for instruction) continues to be influenced by textbooks and test items and often lacks any rationale developed at the local level. The delivery of the materials is still hampered by censorship (both internal and external) and is also strongly influenced by the amount of money available to support and enhance instruction. Where teacher networks and collaboration are strong, teachers and students seem able to overcome the restrictions of a narrowly conceived and shallowly defined curriculum. The evaluation of the curriculum components still rests heavily on the evaluation of students and therefore is reactive rather than proactive. Evaluation continues to drive much of the selection, sequencing, and delivery of the curriculum. Curriculum is most effective for students and teachers when it is a dynamic process rather than a static document. In departments where curriculum is an ongoing process, evaluation plays a substantive role rather than a merely visible one.

The trends reported and issues cited by the other Commissions can be viewed within this four-point construct and review of general curriculum trends for teaching the arts of language in the country's schools.

Linda Shadiow
Director

TRENDS AND ISSUES: THE COMMISSION ON LITERATURE

The members of the Commission on Literature applaud what they perceive as enhanced interest in literature by the profession, college students, and professional journals. A greater number of college students are signing up for courses in literature, and more literature-centered programs and workshops are being made available to classroom teachers. Also encouraging is the increased use of literary works in place of basal readers in elementary schools along with the increased availability of textbooks which provide an integrated approach to the teaching of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It was noted that small, independent presses are currently publishing more literature than in recent years and also making available a writer's early as well as later works.

Nevertheless, the literary establishment is clearly in need of a "renaissance" comparable to what has occurred in the teaching of writing over the past two decades. At present, most classroom teachers are out of touch with contemporary literary theory and criticism and, in many instances, "turned off" by theoretical writing that has become overly abstruse and esoteric. While reader-response theory is generally known and accepted, it continues to have limited implementation in the classroom. With the steadily increasing cost of paperbacks and budget cutbacks, we are witnessing the return to a single-anthology curriculum, with over-weighty tomes that convey the impression of literature as something to be formally studied only in the classroom rather than personally relished and experienced. The exhaustive study apparatus in modern anthologies also has the effect of restricting literary interpretation to what the text and the teachers' manuals prescribe. In addition, contemporary literature is being neglected in the classroom, as well as drama, the

literary essay, and biography/autobiography.

The two most damaging trends, in the opinion of Commission members, continue to be the unfortunate narrowing of the literary canon and an exclusionary approach to the teaching of literature, developments that threaten to cancel the gains made in the profession over the last two decades to affirm the multi-cultural character of American literature. The trivialization of knowledge, as represented by the "cultural literacy" movement, is especially deplored, as well as the issuing of "prescribed lists" which restrict the literatures of America to a meager sampling of the works of "dead white authors." The continuing--and appalling--failure to meet the needs of our multi-cultural population is especially reflected in a marked decline in the representation of literature by minority writers in literature anthologies. Censorship--especially self-applied censorship, that is, a fear of teaching particular works for fear of personal repercussions--also continues to inhibit what is printed and what is taught, resulting in a literary curriculum that is increasingly narrow and unrepresentative.

Overall, the Commission urges more intensive recruitment of minority teachers and intensified efforts to promote teacher awareness of minority writers and strategies for teaching their works. In short, teachers are in need of better preparation not only in how to teach literature but in selecting what to teach.

Gladys V. Veidemanis

Past Director, The Commission on Literature

The Commission on Composition
Trends and Issues

ISSUES (The Commission plans to develop a set of position statements centering on these issues).

1. As one of the fundamental language processes, writing must always be considered with reading, speaking, and listening.
2. Attempts to treat the four languge arts as entirely discrete processes are artificial and may impede students' learning.
3. Language learning is an ongoing process that begins in infancy and extends beyond the last formal class that an individual may take.
4. Teaching that enables language learning will recognize stages of learning and the complexities of language growth.
5. Writing instruction must respect a multiplicity of backgrounds and ensure particapation of all students.
6. The acts of assessing, informing, articulating, and preparing instructors must be informed by these language principles.
7. The commission is concerned that its position on these issues, which is in general harmony with that assumed by NCTE, is not better known among English teachers; nor have they become generally implicated in English-language teaching.

TRENDS

1. Testing.

Writing sample assessment, portfolio evidence and analysis, student and teacher self-reporting are all means of assessment which are to be preferred to standardized so-called "objective" tests of writing ability. The commission continues to emphasize that teachers need to be made familiar with ways to gather and communicate the influence of testing context on any evidence they present regarding student performance. We need to learn how to present such context-rich information that the information generated by tests, especially standardized ones, is made less important. Further, it is the fact of writing tests being imposed on teachers and students from outside that impedes our efforts to improve them.

The commission disapproves of the increasing tendency to implement outcomes based education. At its worst, such an educational philosophy trivializes both objectives and assessment, deleteriously sandwiching instruction between them. Mandated testing is increasingly driving the curriculum, and not just in public schools. It is becoming pervasive in higher education as well.

The commission also notes an increase in testing of teacher ability. Its members caution that this is a very difficult ability to assess, and urges that writing teachers take active roles in defining and implementing such testing, if it becomes necessary to do so.

2. The relationship between reading and writing.

The Commission is encouraged by increasing awareness among members of the profession of this connection. The use of literary and non-literary texts in the composition classroom has increased since last year, although basal readers still predominate in many classrooms. In addition, students are being asked to do more writing in literature classes. Elementary schools seem to be leading the way in contextualizing the arts of language; the term "whole language"

has become current since last year, when it was new to many. Disciplinary boundaries seem to be breaking down between reading and writing, ESL and composition. The commission urges English teachers, especially at the elementary level, to become involved in book-adoption procedures, which can be used as an instrument for change.

3. Genres in writing instruction.

The commission is concerned about a tendency to teach writing as though journal writing and personal narrative were the only sorts of writing, and a concomitant neglect of the expository and persuasive forms of discourse, especially at the intermediate and junior high levels of instruction.

4. Computers in composition.

The commission deplores the continued trivialization of computers. In general, the computer is viewed as a glorified typewriter or an editing machine, even though there have been advances in networking for collaborative writing and in use of computers with low-ability learners.

5. Use of part-time instructors.

The commission deplores the increasing use of adjunct and part-time teachers to teach composition in college and high school classrooms. With decreases in social science enrollments, persons from these fields are arriving, uninformed, in composition classrooms.

6. National Writing Projects.

The NWP, with 165 sites and spreading influence, is prospering; and so are its offshoots (for example, the Iowa writing project has 53 sites, with 1000 persons attending the fall conference).

7. Non-native speakers of English.

The number of non-native speakers of English is growing; however, ESL instruction and research are lagging behind the need. Often ESL programs are housed and administered separately from regular programs; and far too often students in these programs are subjected to drills, which effectively deny them access to literacy in English. Some commission members expressed concern that Freshman English is still being used as a flunk-out course at many universities; of course non-native speakers of English suffer most from this strategy. Less tracking is being done at early ages, however. Schools are learning, slowly, to accomodate the diversity of their students. Commission members expressed concern that trends toward mainstreaming may exacerbate unreal expectations.

Sharon Crowley
Director

TRENDS AND ISSUES

The Commission on Reading (Connie Weaver, Director) noted appreciatively the increased use of literature in the teaching of reading and the continued spread of a whole language approach to literacy, especially insofar as these trends reflect increasing recognition of teachers as professionals. However, Commission members again expressed concern that whole language is being mandated with insufficient input from or inservice education and support for teachers. Furthermore, publishers continue to offer so-called "whole language" materials that actually reflect an unfortunate basalization of liteature or the same old simplistic skills-oriented materials with new "whole language" labels. Both of these latter trends, we believe, are damaging to reading progress.

Commission members noted that in addition to providing teachers with sufficient information and time to implement a more holistic approach to literacy, as well as the choice of whether and/or how to do so, we must support parents in their attempts to understand this newer philosophy and approach. Also, we need to educate secondary English teachers in the reading process and to continue to develop and adopt learner-centered models of assessment and evaluation in reading.

While one Commission member noted as encouraging the fact that the medical model and behavioristic approach in Special Education are gradually giving way to more holistic models and approaches, Commission members more generally expressed concern about the increasing use of deficit models in research, policy-making, and practice with regard to low-income and minority

children and families. As one Commission member noted, in response to new "buzz words" like Urban Education and High Risk students, many professionals are reviving for the "disadvantaged" their old techniques/methods/approaches that tend toward remediation and fragmentation, based again upon a concept of the learner as an empty vessel rather than a whole person and a concept of education as teaching bits and pieces of skills and information, as exemplified in the typical basal reading series and in the cultural literacy movement.

This deficit model and reductionistic approach to education are of particular concern at a time when the numbers of low-income and minority children are rapidly increasing in our schools. Commission members urged that steps be taken immediately to educate both inservice and preservice teachers to meet the educational needs of our culturally diverse population in the twenty-first century. As part of that concern, Commission members also expressed opposition to establishing English as the official language of a state or community.

Constance Weaver
Director

NCTE Commission on Media
Trends and Issues

The Commission on Media focused its attention on the frontiers of media and English, where our language is being reshaped by new technologies and where the nature of literacy is being redefined by sweeping changes in our culture.

Commission members noted a trend in film and television criticism which stresses the cultural nature of visual texts, a trend which parallels developments in literary criticism. Scholars are examining the images on screen as reflections of our time, stories steeped in local values and reconstructed within the framework of a particular community. Allied with this trend is a renewed emphasis on viewer response. Recognition of the audience's role in making sense of visual compositions is replacing earlier notions of "passive viewing" with more active models of viewing. Computers are providing further occasions for understanding users of media as active makers of meaning. Interactive forms of video, literature, and composition are rendering the acts of viewing, reading, and writing more obviously interactive, more deliberate, more manageably systematic. These new forms make it easier to see how individuals participate in the learning process and how they form an interpretive community.

As new technologies extend the reach of individuals, seeming to give them wider access to information and greater control over the uses of that information, they also blur traditional distinctions. Desktop publishing fuses the activities of writing, designing, and printing. Interactive video unites computers and television, creating a new partnership between programming and video production. Hypertext and hypermedia dissolve old boundaries between reading and composing, between images and print. Commission members underlined the need to abandon outmoded definitions when they obstruct new opportunities for growth. The Commission warned against narrow views of literacy which fail to see the written word as only one of several media contributing to the intellectual development of our students and to the evolution of our culture. Television, film, computers, radio, photography--what has come to be called the media arts--are extensions of the language arts. They offer other modes of representing the world to ourselves and of representing ourselves to others. Educators can and should help students view all media more critically and use media more creatively. Our profession needs to develop and practice methods that will incorporate media into the literacy curriculum, methods founded on sound research and guided by coherent theories.

Members were distressed by some negative media trends. They noted that schools rarely have clear policies regarding media. Some schools fail to support successful practices. In many settings, teachers and students are removed from the decision-making process, yet they are expected to make effective use of hardware and software ordered without their knowledge. Commission members voiced strong concern that media may be used to perpetuate a divisive tracking system in which creative, "higher-order" forms of media (like video production and word processing) are reserved for learners from higher socio-economic groups while pre-packaged programs (such as "educational films" and drill-and-practice software) are relegated to groups with a lower socio-economic status. Members cautioned that computers, like film and television, are not neutral conveyers of information. A computer program for instruction in reading or grammar is a definition of langauge learning. A word processing program embodies certain theories of composing. When we use new media as tools to shape our thoughts, we should be aware that the these tools--and hence our thoughts--are themselves shaped by other forces.

The Media Commission called for more vigorous efforts to expand our knowledge of the media arts. We need to understand more clearly how media and literacy relate to one another. We need to investigate how students respond to different media. We need to study the mainstream of mass media and understand how it reflects, neglects, or transforms minority views. We need to know more about the policies and practices that are affecting media education at all levels, both in this country and abroad. We need to investigate those areas of the profession--like testing, teacher training, accreditation, copyright, and censorship--which are often overlooked but have a strong bearing on the way media are included in, or excluded from, the education of our young people. Furthermore, we need to listen more carefully to the young people themselves. They have a lot to teach their teachers about the educational role of media in the years to come.

William V. Costanzo, Director
NCTE Commission on Media

NCTE Standing Committee Against Censorship Trends Report

The Standing Committee against censorship (John M. Kean, Chair) continues to be concerned about: (1) the increase in overall censorship attempts at all levels of schooling, (2) the increase in censorship of teaching procedures and student speech and publications, (3) the failure of administrators to support academic freedom and intellectual honesty for students, (4) publishers' failure to protect the integrity of authors' works, and (5) the chilling divisive "copy cat" potential of court decisions trying to balance the public good with individual rights particularly in the area of religion.

Although such groups as Citizens for Excellence in Education, the Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, the National Legal Foundation, and Educational Research Analysts (the Gablers) are clearly the most visible opponents of intellectual freedom in the schools, they are certainly not alone. Many, perhaps most, censorship attempts are initiated by parents, principals and school district administrators. Most of there attempts seem to be directed at protecting children from exposure to ideas, language, and the opportunities to think critically and creatively. The incidents range from direct attacks on literature i.e., the "bad" language in Of Mice and Men, the accusation that Silverstein's A Light in the Attic in demonic and mocks God, to the use of the Supreme Court's Hazelwood, Missouri, ruling to justify administrators' and School Board members removing anything that they disagree with. We continue to hear reports of teachers being directed to avoid having students keep journals, write personal stories, and teach about critical contemporary issues.

On the positive side, professional organizations and public interest groups are stepping up their attempts to inform the public and to offer legal assistance and intellectual support for teachers whose work is being challenged. Two NCTE affiliate organizations, for example, the Conference on English Education and the Adolescent Literature Assembly have formed committees to help combat censorship. Groups such as NCTE, the American Library Association, and People for the American Way are revising and updating their printed information related to censorship.

The questions remain complex. How do we protect the individual's rights and at the same time foster critical and creative thinking, problem solving, tolerance, judgment and responsibility

in students? Our increasing technological sophistication, our increased need to deal with values, our better understanding of social, emotional, mental and physical health needs and the necessity of the school to work with increasingly diverse populations will continue, appropriately, to generate public debate. What we fight against is the attempt to stifle the debate by keeping important resources from the public–children and adults.

John M. Kean
Chair